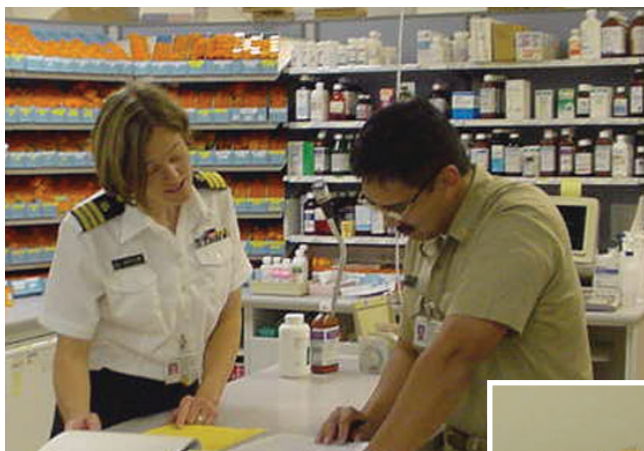


Careers with the Indian Health Service

Pharmacy Careers with the Indian Health Service

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Did you know that the Indian Health Service (IHS) provides pharmacy services to approximately 1.5 million American Indians and Alaska Natives who belong to more than 550 federally recognized tribes in 35 states? Or that most of the more than 500 pharmacists practicing in the IHS are uniformed officers in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS)? If the answer is no, you are not alone. Few students are aware of the existence of the IHS, let alone the career opportunities available for pharmacists. But if you are interested in providing optimal pharmaceutical care and utilizing all of the skills and knowledge you learned in pharmacy school, a career in the IHS may be the right choice for you.

What Is the IHS?

The IHS is an operating division of the USPHS, and the principal federal health care provider for American Indians and Alaska Natives. The mission of the IHS is to elevate the health status of American Indians and Alaska Natives to the highest possible level, by working in close partnership with the people it serves to ensure that comprehensive, culturally acceptable health services are available and accessible. These services are provided through a system of inpatient and ambulatory care facilities located on reservations and communities throughout the country. The IHS utilizes three personnel systems to meet its staffing needs—

the USPHS Commissioned Corps, civil service, and direct tribal hire. This article will focus on the Commissioned Corps system, as most pharmacists employed by the IHS are corps members.

Pharmacy Practice in the IHS

IHS pharmacists practice in a true pharmaceutical care environment, with access to each patient's complete health record. This includes laboratory results, medical history, and the full details of each provider visit to allow for assessment of appropriate drug therapy. Prior to dispensing, any medication problems are resolved with the prescribing health care provider in an atmosphere of mutual respect. All patients are then individually counseled on their medications to ensure a complete understanding of their drug regimen. Pharmacists also engage in many types of primary care activities, using physical assessment skills and their prescriptive authority to evaluate and manage drug therapy.

These primary care roles may include anticoagulation services, hypertension and diabetes management, or asthma and lipid clinics. IHS pharmacists also practice in inpatient settings, providing drug information, patient discharge counseling, intravenous admixtures, and pharmacokinetic consults. And many pharmacists are also involved in the communities they serve,

publishing health-related articles in newspapers or discussing diseases and medication therapy on local radio stations.



Benefits of a Career in the IHS

The USPHS Commissioned Corps is one of the seven uniformed services of the United States, and it requires its pharmacy officers to be U.S. citizens in good health, under 44 years of age, and graduates of an

American Council on Pharmaceutical Education—accredited school of pharmacy. New graduates have up to 1 year to obtain licensure in any state.

Commissioned Corps benefits are similar to those provided to officers in other uniformed services, including taxable base pay and nontaxable housing and subsistence allowances. Pharmacists may also be eligible for special pays, loan repayment, and an accession bonus. Pay and allowances, as well as promotion opportunities, are determined by training and experience. Other benefits include 30 calendar days of annual leave, paid federal holidays, as-needed sick leave, and noncontributory health and dental care for active-duty officers (with low-cost health plans available for dependents). Officers participate in a noncontributory retirement system, allowing for retirement after as few as 20 years of service, and are eligible to contribute to the Thrift Savings Plan to supplement their retirement income. Many opportunities for advanced training exist, includ-

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ing residencies in both pharmacy practice and primary care.

Career progression usually means starting in a clinical career track. Many pharmacists spend their entire career providing clinical services, but others assume administrative or supervisory roles. IHS pharmacists may also transfer to other USPHS operating divisions, such as the FDA or CDC. Regardless of the career path chosen, advancement and promotion occur through years of service and rise in rank.

Current Opportunities for Pharmacists

The IHS, like many fields of pharmacy, is currently experiencing a shortage of pharmacists. This equates with ample opportunities for positions in many locations. Traditionally, careers in federal government service have had lower starting salaries than private-sector positions. However, the tax benefits and cost-of-living differences often help to close this salary gap. And what makes working for the IHS unique is the complementary nature of a comprehensive salary and benefits package and the optimal clinical atmosphere found in our system. Also, many IHS working locations are found in remote and beautiful areas of the United States, with ample outdoor activities and the chance to learn about the culture and history of Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

Preparing for an IHS Career

Due to the clinical nature of most IHS positions, a strong background in therapeutics and primary care is desirable. The ability to communicate, verbally and in writing, as well as a desire to work in a team environment, are essential. This team environment exists not only among peer pharmacists, but also between other health care professionals, such as physicians and nurses. As a student, consider applying for an internship called the Junior Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (JRCOSTEP). The JRCOSTEP, a highly competitive program, allows students to serve in assignments at any time during the year for periods from 31 to 120 days. This is an excellent way to discover if a career in the IHS is for you. [P](#)

For More Information

Indian Health Service

www.ihs.gov

U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps

www.usphs.gov

Pharmacy Opportunities with the U.S.

Public Health Service

www.hhs.gov/progorg/pharmacy/main.html